

# Instability in South Caucasus and the War against Terrorism

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A crisis between Georgia and Russia on April 12–13, 2002, had several new, troubling features, suggesting that war between Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia or, even worse, an armed conflict between Georgia and Russia, might break out.

The increasingly dangerous trajectory of events in the South Caucasus requires close attention from Washington, particularly because U.S. military personnel might find themselves in the middle of a conflict. A site survey team left for Georgia on April 29 to coordinate logistical requirements for a larger contingent of approximately 150-200 troops scheduled to arrive after initial logistical groundwork is complete (initially their arrival was expected in late March). U.S. military personnel will train Georgian troops for an antiterrorist operation in the Pankisi Gorge (a small enclave of Georgian territory bordering Russia where Chechens separatists and, reportedly, international terrorists have taken refuge).

Any conflict in Abkhazia will threaten the stability and integrity of the international antiterrorist coalition. At the very least, Georgia and Russia will shift their attention from global to regional issues. Georgia might request political or even direct military support from the United States. Russia is already unhappy about the U.S. military and political presence in Georgia, and U.S. actions in Georgia could undermine Russia's support for the U.S.-led global war against international terrorism.

### **The Crisis of April 12–13: Balancing on the Brink of War**

The conflict around Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, as well as a similar, but less-known conflict in South Ossetia, is as tangled and hopeless as the one in the Middle East, even if not as old. From the vantage point of immediate policy concerns, deciding who is right and who is wrong there is not necessary. The positions of the two sides can be summarized as follows.

Georgia is unable to regain Abkhazia either by negotiations or by force. The steadily worsening economic and political situation in Georgia, however, has made the return of Abkhazia a matter of political survival for President Eduard Shevardnadze and his entourage. Georgia desperately needs foreign assistance to regain Abkhazia. It has tried to make Russian troops in the area take its side (by threatening to discontinue their peacekeeping mandate or force Russian bases in Georgia to close faster than Russia says it can), but would prefer to invite troops from other countries to help. Indeed, Shevardnadze has asked the United States for troops several times.

Abkhazia refuses to return to Georgia except on condition of receiving broad autonomy, effectively near-independence. It also threatens to leave Georgia completely and join Russia—a proposition that the Russian government firmly rejects but that the Russian parliament, especially recently, seems prepared to entertain.

Russian troops have kept Georgian and Abkhaz troops separate since 1994. Although Georgia distrusts Russian troops (not without reason because the troops, in contrast to the official Russian position, tend to favor the Abkhaz), it has no other choice. The Georgian parliament has adopted several resolutions (most recently in October 2001 and March 2002) demanding that the Russian peacekeepers' mandate be terminated unless they abandon their neutral position and agree to "create conditions for safe return of [Georgian] refugees" to Abkhazia.

The crisis on April 12–13 initially looked much like all the preceding, almost-monthly crises in the area. On April 12, about 80 Russian peacekeepers moved into the upper Kodori Gorge, saying they were in compliance a protocol signed by Georgia and Abkhazia on March 29. The Russians moved in to reestablish a roadblock that had been removed last fall during their fighting with a large group of Chechens who had crossed Georgian territory from the Pankisi Gorge (this case made the Russian military even more suspicious of Shevardnadze). The Georgian government reacted with sharp protests and threats, forcing the Russians to retreat the next day.

The movements of Russia's troops required sanction from the local UN representative and from the Georgian government, neither of which they had. Whether the Russians believed they had adequate authority under the March 29 protocol or were trying to catch Georgia red-handed as they followed up on widespread rumors that Georgia had not removed its troops from the upper Kodori as it had been required to do under the protocol was irrelevant. The Georgian demand was justified, and, unusually, Russian media overwhelmingly condemned military commanders in the area for creating the crisis.

What really made the April 12–13 crisis unusual, however, was the unprecedented assertiveness of the Georgian side. Georgia's defense minister ordered his troops to besiege Russian soldiers and threatened to open fire unless the Russians withdrew the same day. Shevardnadze arrived at the scene and apparently was able to prevent immediate clashes, but he also publicly threatened that Georgia would immediately revoke the mandate of Russian peacekeepers unless they left the upper Kodori.

Simply put, risking direct confrontation with Russian troops was irrational—no matter how inadequate the Russian troops, Georgian troops are even less adequate. War would have meant an early end to the present regime and the beginning of widespread chaos and civil war in Georgia. A direct clash would have also squarely put Russia on the side of Abkhazia, which Georgia cannot risk.

The threat to terminate the mandate of Russian peacekeepers was unusual as well because war with Abkhazia would reignite almost immediately without the peacekeepers, and the chances for winning of the Georgian army do not seem favorable. In fact, Shevardnadze made a similar threat last January, trying to make Russia use its troops to return Georgian refugees to Abkhazia (in effect, starting war against Abkhazia). President Vladimir Putin responded that if the existing mandate did not satisfy Georgia, he would withdraw the peacekeepers. Shevardnadze immediately withdrew his demand. This time, only three months later, he seems more self-assured.

## **U.S. Presence as a New Factor**

Russian commentators attributed the new attitude of Tbilisi to the expected presence of U.S. troops. The U.S. troops' mandate and number are vastly more limited than Shevardnadze had pleaded for from Washington, but their presence might still change the landscape of the South Caucasus.

Ironically, Russian claims that Chechens separatists hiding in Pankisi had links to Taliban and Islamic terrorists motivated the decision to send U.S. troops to train Georgian special forces. Shevardnadze masterfully used the Russian claim to further his own agenda, and when the United States reacted by sending instructors to Georgia, Russians were stunned. Putin was barely able to quiet the uproar.

For his part, Shevardnadze began to promote the U.S. military presence as a "shield" for Georgia, hinting that the current mission was only the beginning of what he obliquely described as the United States' willingness to guarantee Georgia's integrity and sovereignty. He declared that separatists (not just in Abkhazia, but also in South Ossetia and to a lesser extent in Adjara) could only be returned to Georgia by force, implying that the United States would support such an operation. A number of Georgian officials claimed that Abkhazia was an even worse hub for Islamic terrorists than Pankisi. The separatist leadership of Abkhazia, for its part, declared that rooting out terrorists in Pankisi was only a cover-up for the intended war against Abkhazia and began to prepare for an imminent war with Georgia.

The prospect of a U.S. military presence in Georgia prompted the Russian Duma to adopt a resolution, by a 364 to 3 majority, threatening that Russia might recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the case of a new Georgian-Abkhaz war. This resolution had no impact on Russia's government policy, but demonstrated the mood of the country's elite. Subsequently, the Duma demanded the removal of all economic preferences granted to Georgia as a member of the CIS. As part of this preferential treatment, Georgia enjoys considerable discounts on oil, gas, and electricity from Russia (2–2.5 times lower than export prices to non-CIS countries according to the Duma). In conjunction with the introduction of the visa regime for citizens of Georgia in 2001 (for many Georgians, work in Russia is a vital means of supporting their families under conditions of deepening economic crisis in their country), such a measure would have essentially meant the introduction of full-scale economic sanctions. In a sense, the mere plan to send less than 200 U.S. soldiers to Georgia put all sides on the brink of a new conflict.

## **Caveats and Scenarios**

The conflict in Georgia is unlikely to be resolved in the near future except by force. In any event, it does not appear reasonable for the United States to commit significant political, military, or economic resources toward that end while the global war against international terrorism continues. In the near term, a status quo, no matter how imperfect, seems preferable to any action.

The status quo is increasingly under challenge, however. Georgia seems more self-assured, and one cannot rule out an act by it that Abkhazia or Russia might see as a provocation; such a move might come from some figures in the Georgian government (the military and state security services are the likely candidates) or, even more likely, from paramilitary organizations of

Georgian refugees from Abkhazia. Russian reaction is likely to be firmer than the last time—the withdrawal on April 13 was primarily because Russian military commanders made a mistake rather than because of pressure from Georgia. In the future, threats that appeared efficient in the past might backfire and result in an immediate withdrawal of Russian troops and/or economic sanctions. The Abkhaz, who want to force Russian troops to take their side (which could only happen in the case of a direct clash between Russian and Georgian troops), might also stage a provocation.

A “softer” scenario of a breakdown in the status quo would be Georgia’s refusal to extend Russian peacekeepers’ mandate, which expires in the middle of June 2002, or renewed Georgian demands to change that mandate in its favor. Russia will hardly agree and might decide to withdraw troops altogether. The result would be the same—war between Georgia and Abkhazia. To further complicate things, Russian troops are likely to leave considerable amounts of arms behind, triggering Georgian accusations of direct assistance to separatists.

To maintain the status quo, the United States should clearly communicate to both Georgia and Russia the limits of its presence in the region and, in particular, the extent to which the U.S. government is prepared to support Georgia in its attempts to reestablish control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The purpose of such clarification should be to discourage attempts of some elements within the Georgian establishment to provoke an open conflict proceeding from the premise of almost unlimited U.S. support.

The United States should restate its opposition to any provocations in the region to Russia and in particular the need for Russia to better control its own troops so that crises similar to the one on April 12–13 are avoided. It might also help to communicate to Russia that the United States expects Russia to deter the Abkhaz separatist leadership from any rash or provocative moves. The United States could address a similar message to Turkey, which has substantial influence in Abkhazia; many even suggest that Turkish influence there is greater than the Russian one.

Finally, the international community should consider economic assistance to Georgia to help Georgia pay its outstanding debt to Russia. Although Georgia’s energy debt to Russia has been estimated to be only \$157 million, Georgia is still currently unable to pay it. In fact, the United States should consider subsidies to Georgia so that Georgia can pay full price for Russian oil and gas until proceeds from the planned oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea to Turkey provide necessary funds. If necessary, compensation for Georgia’s purchases from Russia could be subtracted from the Russian external debt. This would limit Georgia’s economic dependence on Russia and remove one possible cause of conflict.